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Statement of purpose

Taking stock of the universe of positions and goals that constitutes Leftist politics today, we are left with the disquieting suspicion that a deep commonality underlies the apparent variety: What exists today is built upon the desiccated remains of what was once possible.

In order to make sense of the present, we find it necessary to disentangle the vast accumulation of positions on the Left and to evaluate their saliency for the possible reconstitution of emancipatory politics in the present. Doing this implies a reconsideration of what is meant by the Left.

Our task begins from what we see as the general disenchantment with the present state of progressive politics. We feel that this disenchantment cannot be cast off by sheer will, by simply “carrying on the fight,” but must be addressed and itself made an object of critique. Thus we begin with what immediately confronts us.

The *Platypus Review* is motivated by its sense that the Left is disoriented. We seek to be a forum among a variety of tendencies and approaches on the Left—not out of a concern with inclusion for its own sake, but rather to provoke disagreement and to open shared goals as sites of contestation. In this way, the recriminations and accusations arising from political disputes of the past may be harnessed to the project of clarifying the object of Leftist critique.

The *Platypus Review* hopes to create and sustain a space for interrogating and clarifying positions and orientations currently represented on the Left, a space in which questions may be raised and discussions pursued that would not otherwise take place. As long as submissions exhibit a genuine commitment to this project, all kinds of content will be considered for publication.

Submission guidelines

Articles will typically range in length from 750–4,500 words, but longer pieces will be considered. Please send article submissions and inquiries about this project to editor.platypusreview@gmail.com. All submissions should conform to the *Chicago Manual of Style*.

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About the Platypus Affiliated Society

The Platypus Affiliated Society, established in December 2006, organizes reading groups, public fora, research and journalism focused on problems and tasks inherited from the “Old” (1920s–30s), “New” (1960s–70s) and post-political (1980s–90s) Left for the possibilities of emancipatory politics today.

“The entanglement of Marxism” continues on page 4

proletarian viewpoint. Similarly, as far as epistemology of their thought. So it appears that Marxists attribute to these authors some arguably inefable quality of al. This authority is in excess of the rational content resort to depends to the personal authority of Marx, et the ideas expressed to justify our case, we would not Darwinian theory. Arguably, if we could just reference agnomist Troim Lyseenko’s obsecurantist rejection of authoritarian and violent imposition of the Soviet Soviet life sciences back by decades through the declaration came at a time when Stalin was setting the highest scientific authority in the world.”¹⁰ Cohen’s Cohen declaring that “for a Communist. . . Stalin is into theological thinking is that of a certain Francois into theological thinking is that of a certain Francois claims. An example of a seemingly pathological lapse theological and not rational/scientific, as it ostensibly invocations of orthodoxy and cast Marxism as being becoming such, discern a theological aspect to Marxist anti-Marxists, and sometimes those on the road to of orthodoxy has religious connotations. Indeed, orthodox Marxists take it to be true or not. Any notion a classic Marxist text can help determine whether of the physical or theoretical claim are being considered. Nevertheless, whether a claim is consonant with whatever the prominence or professional standing example. Experimental evidence would be demanded, Newton, Albert Einstein, or even Richard Feynman, for accepted of claim about physical reality by Isaac scientific milieu, when one argues for or against the theoretician and their status would not normally be involved in this way in contemporary natural to evaluate ideas. In contrast, the specific identity of Aristotle than the way modern critics are supposed medieval philosophers treated the teachings of seem pre-modern, more reminiscent of the way need for empirical or theoretical confirmation, can of the thinker, obviating to some extent at least a This notion of orthodoxy based on the identity words of Marx, Engels, and Lenin themselves. seem to hold weight precisely because they are the thinker. Thus, the words of Marx, Engels, Lenin, etc. individual’s personal status as a seminal Marxist of intellectual authority partly on the basis of the Orthodoxy here seems to involve the recognition Marxist author or other, optimally Marx himself. it is consonant with the perspective of some seminal view or a claim, at least in part, by demonstration that this interpretation, to be one who feels able to justify a orthodoxy. I take the orthodox Marxist, according to should not be taken as an invalidation of such Marxist curious or peculiar, so my expanding on its peculiarity that any notion of Marxist orthodoxy was necessarily of orthodoxy? Spenser was forthright in recognizing theoretical challenges with an appeal to the claims rather than “purity,” Marxists should respond to Nikki’s provocation. In response, he suggested that the interest and importance of what he termed Fellow panelist, Spencer Leonard, acknowledged

oppose granting such inefable authority to the likes of Stalin, but continue to do this to Marx, Engels, Lenin, Trotsky, and selected others.

In his remarks, Studebaker pointed out that when we allow some individual to be our pedagogue regarding theoretical or political matters, we cannot help implicitly acknowledging an inefably based authority that the pedagogical posesesses.”¹¹ Ben invoked here the classical concept of *authoritas*,¹² some inefable property of a person, the discernment of which legitimates the pedagogic and/or political authority we grant them. Ben expressed appreciation of that she was helping us focus on a crucial issue that, that she seem loathe, for whatever reason, to address. (O) their credit, all three panelists were exceptions that “prove” this rule.) It is interesting to consider to what extent Ben’s recognition of our implicit acceptance of inefable authority does or does not validate Nikki’s call for an acceptance of transcendent authority. Entertaining the value of the inefable does not necessarily entail recognizing the reality of metaphysical transcendence or even divinity, Stalinist claims that Bolsheviks are made of a “special stuff” notwithstanding, but it does tend to foreclose a postivist knee-jerk dismissal of such invocations of the materially transcendent. Providing an opening for such notions potentially challenges a challenge to what have been taken as Marxist shibboleths regarding materialism, science, and mysticism. Critical theorists have frequently invoked theological considerations in recent decades, whether it be through the interest in the theological aspects of Walter Benjamin’s or Theodor Adorno’s thought, Alain Badiou’s notion of revolutions as quasi-miraculous “Events,”¹³ or Slavoj Žižek’s recent turn to “Christian atheism.”¹⁴ Nikki’s call for Marxists to humble themselves before God is reflective of recent trends in Marxist thought and critical theory. These trends are part of the legacy of the Left’s many defeats in the last hundred years or so.

The argument could be made that any aspiration to a Marxist purity, such as eschewing all hints of the theological or the religious, is necessarily quixotic. Unalienated thought will not be, at least until social emancipation has been realized, inevitably pervasive. Some Marxists might aver that only full communism will transcend social alienation allowing fully emanicipatory processes has been completed, we will never fully cleanse ourselves of conceptual residues of alienation, i.e., of theoretical and epistemological distortion. One is tempted to resurrect Lenin’s admonishment that anyone waiting for the pure proletarian revolution, i.e., one infected solely by genuinely proletarian consciousness, will wait forever.¹⁵ Real revolutions, Lenin argued, will always be impure” from a Marxist or composition and therefore “impure” from a Marxist or composition and therefore “impure” from a Marxist or

Benjamin Studebaker, would point out. Some Marxists authoritativeness, as another panelist at the event, to these authors some arguably inefable quality of of their thought. So it appears that Marxists attribute to these authors some arguably inefable quality of al. This authority is in excess of the rational content resort to depends to the personal authority of Marx, et the ideas expressed to justify our case, we would not Darwinian theory. Arguably, if we could just reference agnomist Troim Lyseenko’s obsecurantist rejection of authoritarian and violent imposition of the Soviet Soviet life sciences back by decades through the declaration came at a time when Stalin was setting the highest scientific authority in the world.”¹⁰ Cohen’s Cohen declaring that “for a Communist. . . Stalin is into theological thinking is that of a certain Francois into theological thinking is that of a certain Francois claims. An example of a seemingly pathological lapse theological and not rational/scientific, as it ostensibly invocations of orthodoxy and cast Marxism as being becoming such, discern a theological aspect to Marxist anti-Marxists, and sometimes those on the road to of orthodoxy has religious connotations. Indeed, orthodox Marxists take it to be true or not. Any notion a classic Marxist text can help determine whether of the physical or theoretical claim are being considered. Nevertheless, whether a claim is consonant with whatever the prominence or professional standing example. Experimental evidence would be demanded, Newton, Albert Einstein, or even Richard Feynman, for accepted of claim about physical reality by Isaac scientific milieu, when one argues for or against the theoretician and their status would not normally be involved in this way in contemporary natural to evaluate ideas. In contrast, the specific identity of Aristotle than the way modern critics are supposed medieval philosophers treated the teachings of seem pre-modern, more reminiscent of the way need for empirical or theoretical confirmation, can of the thinker, obviating to some extent at least a This notion of orthodoxy based on the identity words of Marx, Engels, and Lenin themselves. seem to hold weight precisely because they are the thinker. Thus, the words of Marx, Engels, Lenin, etc. individual’s personal status as a seminal Marxist of intellectual authority partly on the basis of the Orthodoxy here seems to involve the recognition Marxist author or other, optimally Marx himself. it is consonant with the perspective of some seminal view or a claim, at least in part, by demonstration that this interpretation, to be one who feels able to justify a orthodoxy. I take the orthodox Marxist, according to should not be taken as an invalidation of such Marxist curious or peculiar, so my expanding on its peculiarity that any notion of Marxist orthodoxy was necessarily of orthodoxy? Spenser was forthright in recognizing theoretical challenges with an appeal to the claims rather than “purity,” Marxists should respond to Nikki’s provocation. In response, he suggested that the interest and importance of what he termed Fellow panelist, Spencer Leonard, acknowledged

Enlightenment sensibility: it is a bracing argument that merits serious engagement.

As mentioned above, the standard Marxist stance has been taken to see religiosity as irretrievably entwined with social alienation. This is alienation, Marxists have argued, needs to be overcome through revolutionary praxis informed by rigorous rational critique. Thus, “revolutionary praxis will involve the (Marx nowhere suggests that religious liberties should be abridged.) Marx predicts the inability of non-dialectical and contemplative rationalism to complete this task of supersession, just as Nikki does. In the 1st thesis on Feuerbach, for example, Marx says that philosophical rationalism in itself can only interpret the world, not change it.”¹⁷ In Enlightenment thought of capitalis’m, only dialectical, praxis-based thought, reflecting the viewpoint of the proletariat as a collective subject, can elide the antinomies and impasses of bourgeois contemplative thought, however rational the latter purports to be.¹⁸ Dialectical materialism, it is argued, offers a viable route beyond both individualist contemplative reason and religious mystification. The ionization of dialectical materialist thought is linked to the acceptance of a Marxist philosophy of history, according to which the proletariat necessarily enacts social emancipation and enables historical self-philosophical consequences for Marxists.

The entanglement of Marxism and theology is a symptom

A response to the “Theory in crisis” panel

Tom Canel

1 The entanglement of Marxism and theology is a symptom

A response to the “Theory in crisis” panel

Tom Canel

2 Marx-ism?

Or, thinking the crisis in (Marx's) thought

Justin Spiegel

3 Marxism and democracy

Grayson Walker

www:

Would Adorno have a Twitter account?

Resignation and counter-resignation on October 7

Fakhry Al-Serdawi

Disavowal plaguing the liberal Left

Michael Fuentes

Noting that the contemporary Left seems mired in a “Theory in crisis” panel!

initiated by “Hegelian e-girl” Nikki Kirigan in the thread, which I found particularly engrossing, was a number of interesting threads of discussion. One Conference in Boston and Cambridge generated a THE PANELS AT the 2024 Playpus East Coast

In Marx’s writings, communism, naturalism, and atheism are frequently associated with each other. Thus, while it is true that in the “Contribution to the Critique of Hegel’s *Philosophy of Right*” introduction, Marx does acknowledge that religion can perform the seemingly benign function of a painkiller, i.e., it can be the “opium of the people.”² In texts such as “Theses on Feuerbach,”³ *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts*,⁴ and *The German Ideology*,⁵ Marx clearly avers that religion (as well as philosophy, by the way) constitutes a kind of distorted thinking that, in its very essence, serves to reproduce human social alienation. It does this by casting what is a product of our own subjectivity as an external force. According to Marx, the emancipatory overcoming of social alienation will therefore involve the supersession of religion through materialist critique and revolutionary praxis. Even in the aforementioned “Contribution,” where Marx does allow religion a palliative function, Marx sees the theoretical sublation of religious thought as necessary for social emancipation. Pre-empting the invocation of these reversed texts by Marxist traditionalists seeking to rebut her, Nikki stressed the importance of shedding the Marxist “purity fetish” that excludes religious tropes from Leftist discourse. Her argument seemed to propagate an unabashed recourse by the Left to positions incompatible with



Marxism and democracy

Grayson Walker

On September 10, 2024, the Platypus Affiliated Society hosted the panel “Democracy and the Left” at New York University with panelists Andy Gittlitz (Antifada), Sebastian (Revolutionary Communists of America), George Shulman (NYU), and Grayson Walker (American Communist Party). An edited, expanded version of Grayson Walker’s opening remarks follows, in which he responds to questions posed in the panel’s prompt.¹

Panel introduction

The 2016 election was understood by many on the Left as a crisis of democracy. In turn, it raised questions about the nature of democracy, society, politics, and their relationship. Eight years later, after a global pandemic and the presidency of Joe Biden, characterized by inertia, inflation, and the emergence of geopolitical relations, these questions have only persisted while seemingly becoming more obscure. Democracy seems to retain an enigmatic character, always slipping any fixed form and content. People under the dynamic of capital keep demanding, at times, “more” and “real” democracy. But democracy can be like Janus: it often expresses both the progressive emancipatory demands, but also their defeat, their hijacking by an elected “Bonaparte.” What does recent history tell us about democracy?

Questions and opening remarks

Is democracy oppressive, or can it be such? How would you judge Lenin’s formulation that “democracy is also a state and that, consequently, democracy will also disappear when the state disappears”?

WHETHER OR NOT democracy is “oppressive” is a moot point for Marxists. Marxism is not a vale of tears accounting for every form of “oppression,” but a language by which the working class articulates the actually existing class struggle.

For Marxists at least historically, the modern state is “an organ of class rule, an organ for the oppression of one class by another”² which legally sanctifies this class oppression. The state attains independent existence as a separate entity from society in the emancipation of property from the community; this abstraction of man from the totality of his being, an abstraction given *formal* recognition by the state, is the institutionalization of the very social dissolution that engenders this abstraction in the first place. Yet the state conceitedly pretends to account for what lies beyond its own formal recognition as *a state* dealing in law and right; a detached reflexivity that would collapse upon a recognition of the primordial sin of the state itself and exposure of its *partial* character. This is why Marx says that the modern state exists for the sake of private property, whereas the *independence of the state* from property is only found in those civilizations that have yet to pass from estate into class (or, relevant to our *socialistic* age, from those states which have subordinated the logic of capital to a sovereign political authority). According to Marx and Engels, even the democratic republic retains a class character, giving popular legitimation for the rule by capital. This class character of liberal democracy is simply occluded by the universal pretenses of the state and its equality of rights and liberties, but the reality of class dictatorship undergirding it is made apparent and even explicit with monopoly capital.

So all states, to the extent that they are institutions consolidating class rule, are “oppressive.” Yes, the political institutions associated with facilitating democracy — for instance, the bourgeois liberal form — are “oppressive,” but so is the proletarian form. The question is not whether the state is oppressive, but who oppresses whom, i.e., the social character of the oppression.

So I reject this question of “oppressive” and instead want to substitute it with “amicable to the workers’ movement.” Is democracy necessarily amicable to the workers’ movement, and will democracy too disappear with the development of socialism and the withering away of the state?

Lenin specifically talks about the transformation of democracy into socialism: that consistent democracy, in fact, “demands” socialism. The “democratic process” of voting is simply a way of accounting for a general people’s will, but if this democratic process can only produce unpopular candidates like Kamala Harris and Donald Trump, then “rule by the people” isn’t really being facilitated. Clearly, the democratic process of voting is not enough to represent a *general will* — that this “general will” cannot be accounted for by the *form* of politics alone. For democracy to really be ruled by the people, there must be no oligarchic campaign-financing laws, no big-tech monopolies gatekeeping IP and censoring speech, no indebtedness of the *res publica* to the interests of BlackRock and Vanguard; there must be *class dictatorship* exercised over capital so that politics can act freely and sovereignly and so the common property of the people (*res publica*) is not adulterated by private interest. For democracy to accomplish *rule by the people*, we must already go beyond the democratic form and establish a *socialist* authority that secures democracy against the domination by oligarchic finance capital. To the extent that the democratic process of deliberation is redundant for ascertaining the popular will, even the democratic form disappears into the depoliticized “administration of things” of higher-stage socialist production.

This process of disappearance, which Lenin describes in *State and Revolution* (1917), begins at the outset of the proletarian dictatorship and involves the *simplification* of the state to operations of control and accounting to the point where “any cook can run the country.”³ This process involves the streamlining of the state to its minimal functions so that it may oversee the development of the forces of production “as rapidly as possible”⁴ and safeguard the rule of the proletarian class, all the while being resolutely against the ossified, institutionalized formalism of “democracy” that strangles authentic forms of association and initiative. This applies as much to the economy as it does for the state (hence the socialism of Deng’s “Reform and Opening Up”⁵).

By securing economic sovereignty and freeing politics from the dictatorship by monopoly capital, socialist proletarian dictatorship establishes substantive and not simply aspirational democracy.

This is markedly different from what political pundits often mean by “democracy.” When they talk about “defending democracy,” what they really mean is defending the institutions and mechanisms of the state that mask class dictatorship. They just mean defending the formal integrity of the state; it has nothing to do with the content of the state. “Respecting democracy” in the West just means obeying openly corrupt Democratic Party primaries and the proceduralism that masks personalistic backroom dealings and outright bribery. Or it means ensuring the victory of the prevailing ruling-class narrative against “Russian disinformation,” “CCP infiltration,” and fighting against the ever-present specter of “fascism” invoked every four years to shuffle voters to the Democrats and enforce social conformity. “Democracy” today refers to little more than the consensus of unelected three-letter agencies, Rockefeller-funded think tanks, Murdoch-owned corporate media, and Soros-organized NGOs, which all function as expressions of the same monopoly-capitalist dictatorship and which excuses every violation of democratic liberties all in the name of defending “democracy.” Aristotle noted in his study of the democratic constitutions of Greek polities that the democratic states were often just oligarchies where the *hoi polloi*⁶ were reduced to debt peonage. In a country where finance capital has consolidated politics, the media, and the public square, it is hard to think we are beyond Aristotle’s judgment.

In this sense, “democracy” is *oppressive* and hostile to working-class politics. And as the liberal democracies lose their veneer of being governed by popular sovereignty and, in their panic over Trump and their hatred for the “deplorable,” are exposed as the cheap masks for the dictatorship of capital, the “democratic” states openly drop their pretenses to “rule by the people” and strip away democratic liberties using the voice of “expert opinion” who, with the help of a banker’s check, can Fact Check™ whether mankind is *really* enough to govern itself.

The “democratic” state, which more brazenly bears the fangs of Wall Street as it sinks deeper into the general crisis of capitalism, grows openly hostile even to the institutions of democratic rule and procedure. Just as the oligarchy ruling our “liberal democracy” shamelessly assassinated revolutionaries like Fred Hampton and MLK Jr. in the 60s, today it goes after dissidents like Omali Yeshitela and Edward Snowden or journalists like Gary Webb and Gonzalo Lira. Where the oligarchy cannot kill its challengers, it turns to vicious disinformation campaigns: controlling the algorithms, botting social-media accounts, carefully crafting and controlling a narrative and discourse, and exploiting the herd mentality of netizens to hate what they should love and love what they should hate. The oligarchy abandons its pretense to “self-determination” as it invades Iraq and Afghanistan over lies it is never held accountable for, coups the democratically elected governments of Ukraine and Iran, and imposes mass surveillance on the American public to the detriment of our own Constitutionally-guaranteed freedoms. It is the globalized capitalist ruling class, in the name of safeguarding and protecting democracy against “fascism” — which increasingly only means any form of political sovereignty outside the liberal democratic kind — that destroys democracy and institutes *genuinely* fascist rule (i.e., the “open terroristic dictatorship” of finance capital). In order to preserve democracy, it is necessary to secure power against the rule by capital — to go beyond the democratic struggle and pass into socialism. In this sense, Marxism gives expression to the symptom of democracy’s inadequacy for realizing popular rule.

Democracy, for Lenin and for virtually all Marxists historically, had more to do with what is today referred to as “populism” than it does with liberal democracy. Liberal democracy is always inadequate as a vehicle for popular rule, as it gives recognition only to form — but populism, especially as it comes at the expense of the formal integrity of the state-form, is a kind of revenge of content and a reminder of the *ends* of democracy. Marxists are democrats insofar as that word means rule by the *demos*, i.e., supporting *popular forms of sovereignty* that can give expression to the interests of the proletarian class and to the broad masses, but they recognize that such a democracy is only guaranteed by the *dictatorship of the proletariat* and economic sovereignty. Marxism is, after all, born from a recognition that this *demos* is itself only the *political-formal* side of a people which finds itself materially reproduced in the proletariat (a *class*, living *in* but not *of* civil society, which exists in a particular way in spite of universal political equality — and is thus beyond the political recognition of formal, liberal democracy). In this sense, Marxists are defenders of bourgeois freedoms that provide the breathing room for educating, agitating, and organizing, but this should not be confused with a defense of the institutions that have facilitated the destruction of these freedoms under the guise of “defending democracy.” To the extent that Marxists “defend democracy,” they defend popular sovereignty against encroachment by the monstrously bureaucratic, increasingly open class dictatorship of the monopoly bourgeoisie. *This puts them on the side of defending the Constitution of the United States against encroachments by the ruling class*, defending the basic rights of the people as guaranteed by the Bill of Rights, especially as it concerns freedom of speech and expression, against the security state in the form of the DHS, FBI, NSA, IRS, CIA, and other unelected, unaccountable agencies that act as the strong arm of the monopoly bourgeoisie. To summarize it in terms of MAGA Communism:

communists are on the side of *the people* against the deep state. Marxist-Leninists must strive to build a popular front with all forms of resistance against the two-party duopoly to secure an independent people’s pole, within which communists are tasked with proving themselves as the most capable and far-sighted leaders of the working majority. This is the extent to which Marxists support democracy and the necessity of the popular front for Marxism-Leninism.

As for the withering away of the state, this has always also meant the withering away of the proceduralism and formalism of bourgeois democracy. According to Engels, the state-form disappears into the “museum of antiquities” alongside the bronze axe and the spinning wheel.⁷ This disappearance coincides with the disappearance of class antagonism: that as the development and socialization of the forces and relations of production expedite the withering away of classes, so too will the state be converted from the governance over people into the “administration of things” and the conductor of production. The disappearance of the state is not a disappearance that is “willed” by any actor; the state only “disappears” in the sense of becoming an inadequate form for the overflowing productive forces that have outstripped the necessity of something as simple as a “state” that must rely on coercive mechanisms (including deliberative mechanisms like “democracy”). The withering away of the state may well be the automation of central accounting and regulatory mechanisms that plan production around its own communistic ESG⁸ scores in conjunction with information received through price signals on the market, acting as the simulated form of real-time consumer demand. This simplification and reduction of the state is at the same time a universalization of the logic of the state across socialized production and even the private sphere of consumption, which it is now accountable for. Marx himself says that, in “true democracy the *political state disappears*.”⁹ True rule by the people, now elevating content to the level of form, redresses the wound out of which the state emerges and thus oversees the disappearance of political rule altogether. The state is so total it can be reduced to a grain of sand and grasped by any person; so powerful it has become synonymous with its conditions of existence and ceased to be a state. The state is not abolished; it loses its abstract character and dissipates into the conscious production of history. This is the meaning of “withering away of the state,” which includes the withering away of democracy. The state returns to its strict etymological meaning: *the state simply becomes the state of things*.

So the process of socialization, which eventually comes at the expense of the state-form in the higher stages in the development of socialism, should not be imagined as a willful or goal-oriented process of abolishing the state. As the productive forces are unleashed at a greater scale and as production grows increasingly socialized, the state *loses its political character* and is converted into the *administration* of production: to oversee production in such a way that is not political, but is beyond politics because the class antagonism upon which the state rests has been overcome. Rather than view this anachronistically as the extension of bourgeois forms of sovereignty to the point of extremity — imagining a utopia where everything is rationally arbitrated, determined by a vote, or otherwise subject to “democratic” procedure — the withering away of the state most readily takes the form of its depoliticization and its assumption of a purely administrative role. It is not the disappearance of accounting and administration, but their *depoliticization* as the state becomes substantial. But this depoliticization is not the farcical “depoliticization” of EU technocrats and unelected political operatives of the bourgeoisie, who merely conceal the class struggle by suppressing the arena in which it is waged, but the depoliticization of a proletarian authority that has established common ownership of the land and direction over the process of production on that basis, i.e., economic sovereignty. The withering away of the state is not imposed by the victorious proletarian class, but is the natural result of this class rule which now oversees the unleashing of the productive forces and its orientation towards ends that are not alien to and abstracted from it (i.e., capital).

How do you understand the Left’s relationship to democracy historically? Do you consider historical struggles for democracy by workers as the medium by which they are “assimilated” to the system, or the only path to emancipation that they couldn’t avoid trying to take?

The Bolshevik position has been that communist parties should participate in bourgeois electoral politics while simultaneously opposing the narrow form of bourgeois electoral politics. The point is that “rule by the people” comes into conflict with the institutions of formally establishing this rule or translating the popular will into political authority (e.g., in the two-party system). In the name of safeguarding this form, the bourgeoisie casts aside all respect for “rule by the people” and establishes endlessly cascading offices, agencies, unelected bureaucracies, and middle-managers who ensure the “integrity” of democracy, who promote the crux of the democratic struggle to be one of deliberating over trivial bathroom politics, or who endlessly harp on about “human rights” as they carpet bomb the people of Gaza.

For the historical Left, democracy had nothing to do with this. Democracy meant going down to the countryside and uniting the people behind a popular opposition to the increasingly unconstitutional and criminal establishment. To the extent that we are not Mensheviks, who confused “democracy” with the institutions of liberal democracy, but Bolsheviks, for whom democracy *still retains its meaning as rule by the people* even at the expense of “democratic rule” (e.g., soviets against the Constituent Assembly), democracy’s essence is the class struggle and its form is the most expressive and communicative avenue of articulating that essence.

In Russia, the most expressive form of exercising the popular will were the soviets (“councils”) organized by workers, soldiers, and peasants rather than the officially governing Constituent Assembly. Was the elevation of the soviets as the

supreme body of governance in Russia, at the expense of the Constituent Assembly, democratic? From the perspective of liberal democracy (which only recognizes form), it was not, but from the perspective of Marxism, it only raised democracy to a *higher form* of expression otherwise stifled by the formal “democracy” of Bobrisnyskys, Milyukovs, and Kerenskys¹⁰ who continued to bleed the people on the frontlines of a world war and at home on the frontlines of the class war. It was only the Bolshevik Party, operating from the recognition that people’s rule is only accomplished when the working majority’s own institutions are empowered, that could elevate soviet democracy to the level of political authority. Those left-SRs and Mensheviks who recognized the new soviet authority over the bourgeois Constituent Assembly joined with the Bolsheviks; those siding with the unpopular but Officially Democratic™ provisional dictatorship turned against the soviet rule of workers, soldiers, and peasants.

The extent to which there is class struggle in the first place already evinces the fact that bourgeois liberal democracy is not sufficient for expressing the will of the people. If it were, there would be no need for class struggle at all and we would be justified in abandoning it in favor of Bernstein’s revisionism. This class struggle was historically given recognition by the proletarian dictatorship in the form of the party, whereas the separate state institutions facilitate the governance and administration of the political form wherein class struggle is waged. This political form is not only constituted by the basic rights and dignities safeguarded in bourgeois democracy, but is socialistic in character, with the supplementation of these rights and liberties by proletarian dictatorship exercised by the party. This proletarian dictatorship, in ensuring the bourgeois freedoms are made actual (namely, by preventing the rule by monopoly capital and eliminating usurious rent), is at the same time a fuller realization of democracy. By unfettering political sovereignty from the private interest of monopoly capital, proletarian rule fully realizes the content of the bourgeois-democratic form of politics, marking its passage into the socialist form. But this can only be accomplished through the proletarian dictatorship, i.e., the elevation of the party over the rule by private interest (or more specifically, by capital). In China, this is the duality of the party dictatorship and the state form: the former prevents the subjugation of the latter by private interest and thereby secures the class character of the state.

What is the relationship between democracy and the working class today?

If we understand democracy as the ruling class does, i.e., the midwit way, then democracy is nothing more than the veneer of popular sovereignty over an otherwise open dictatorship of finance capital. This fact is popularly understood by the working class of the United States and, absent the language of Marxism, is articulated in the form of libertarianism, 3-percenters, Constitutionalists, and MAGA. The immediate form of the recognition of democracy as a mask for the ruling class is the reassertion of Constitutional principles meant to safeguard the democratic rights and liberties of the people, who feel increasingly subject to mass surveillance, propaganda, and the futile nature of the two-party system. The people rebel against this façade of democracy, which is increasingly theatrical, by assuming a whole litany of ideologies and associations from conspiracy theories to reactions, from religious movements to gangs. The duty of Marxists is not to scold the people for their spontaneous forms of consciousness and thereby hand them over to the class enemy. The duty of Marxists is to raise the banner of class struggle in each instance and “show them what they are really fighting for” (Marx),¹¹ going neither too far ahead nor lagging behind the masses, but establishing communion with them, acting as their greatest clarifiers and champions of their interests.

The working class already confronts the existing “liberal democracy” as inauthentic and farcical. In this respect, they are not wrong, but because the Left has failed to champion these basic democratic freedoms — all in the name of siding with the bourgeois state and its endless progressive NGOs against “fascist” MAGA, or by standing against the “settler-colonialist” Constitutional liberties — they have made themselves enemies of working people and hostile to their popular demands originating from the general crisis of capitalism — a crisis so acute that it has called into question the very foundations of bourgeois democracy and American statehood itself! And because these popular demands are not immediately articulated in a communistic form — that is, a form that clarifies the workers’ struggle for the working class — it instead takes the form of promoting political mascots like Trump who are imagined as gloriously defeating the “deep state” and “restoring” America, making it “Great Again.” But what is actually communicated by “Make America Great Again” is not a return to the past of Jim Crow and white supremacy, but is the Jacobite-like language of a working-class articulating the loss of bourgeois freedoms and the cultural-communal bonds of the “American Dream” coupled with increasingly harsh living conditions for the American working and downwardly-mobile middle classes. MAGA, and independent forms of similarly partisan politics, is an open question. The rational kernel of the MAGA working class, which already articulates a partisan politics beyond the Democratic and Republican establishments, is the proletarian class struggle; it takes the active intervention of communists to develop this kernel into a formidable working-class movement and ally it with other strata of the people outside the articulation of MAGA (e.g., with the ADOS¹² movement). It is only within such a popular-democratic pole that a communist politics can be born.

The American working class, given to its whims, gravitates towards a position that is vaguely popular-democratic but outside the confines of bourgeois liberal democracy, and specifically poised against and even defined by its opposition to the actual institutions of the state, from the DOJ to the

Executive. It is partisan and establishes a counter-hegemonic discourse. The MAGA movement, which was subject to all sorts of political hucksters, was a nascent form of working-class political sovereignty outside the media-academia-NGO establishment of bourgeois liberal democracy — and for this sin, MAGA was blindly castigated as “fascist” by much of the Left, which judged it not based on its class character, but based on its ideological impurity. But isn’t it the high point of arrogance to assume, from a standpoint cultivated above and at the expense of the masses, that one’s academia-sanctified intersubjective “revolutionary consciousness” is more advanced than the actually existing working majority? Shouldn’t one first enter dialogue with this working majority, subjecting theory to the test of practice? Or is it easier to simply condemn workers for their “fascism” when your theory is so brittle it shatters against their crude discourse and politics, which dares to express itself beyond the “respectable,” “progressive” institutions elevated by Leftists to the status of social authority? In reality, this social authority is the whip of the bourgeoisie exercising itself through “progressive” institutions against objectively democratic and popular forces. This social authority is objectively the Left-wing of fascism.

Let’s take an example: the 2022 Canadian trucker protests, otherwise known as the Freedom Convoy. What was the Canadian Left’s reaction to this unprecedented form of working-class power in the 21st century? It was to condemn the strike as fascist, effectively siding with Trudeau’s unpopular liberal establishment against spontaneous working-class organization! Rather than going down to the striking truckers and disseminating class consciousness — earning the trust and faith of the people by standing with them against the bourgeois state, against the monopolists, no matter the level of consciousness of striking truckers — “communists” in Canada and the United States sneered at them for flying MAGA flags and articulating, in the only language available to them, the class struggle. This shameless act of cowardice and anti-popular malice not only destroyed what little credibility the “Communist” Party of Canada had left but actively helped drive the working majority into the arms of reaction. Just like the 2018 *gilets jaunes* of France, the 2022 railroad strike in the U.S., and the 2024 farmer protests across Europe, the Left-sided with the state and betrayed the working class, abusing Marxist phrases and dismissing striking workers as a petty-bourgeois reaction to the policy and narratives imposed by the ruling elite. (certainly, a gift from the ruling class of bankers and technocrats for the working majority). Had Bolsheviks behaved this way, refusing contact with the masses for their embrace of spontaneous forms of consciousness, there would have been no Bolshevik Revolution to speak of.

It is an obvious truth that communists must intervene and that the working class does not arrive at class consciousness spontaneously, but it is equally erroneous to imagine that the working class only achieves class consciousness when it has adopted the institutionalized form of Class Struggle™ as sanctified by academics at state-funded universities and championed by student radicals whose relationship with Marxism is akin to an edgy form of political LARP. Marxists are compelled to enter dialogue with the masses, for theory to be tested in practice and for practice to refine theory. Marxists do not derive their politics from some “social authority” downstream from the Ford dynasty or the Open Society Foundations, but from testing their mettle and intervening at the site of the class struggle as it actually exists. Such is the nature of the dialectic of masses and party and is even the very logic of party democracy. But the Western Left puts ideology before class analysis, and because of this it has become the willing tool for the establishment.

The relationship of democracy to the working class is thus: to raise the democratic form of working-class politics above the institutional form. Communists give recognition to the avenues expressing working class power wherever they spring up, at the town hall or on the internet, and do not side with the bourgeoisie’s constellation of NGOs and unelected social engineers who “safeguard” democracy against “populism,” i.e., the banner of democracy raised outside the anti-democratic institutions of “democratic” liberalism.

A well-meaning but misguided response to this would be to assume the third-period position of establishing a popular front with bourgeois democratic parties against the tide of fascism. In the spirit of the Spanish Republic and the establishment of popular democracies consisting of a coalition with democratic forces, we are told to side with the Democratic Party against the tide of fascism in the form of Trump. But this criticism misses the mark of what the Popular Front was about in the first place.

The Popular Front was, first of all, popular. It did not base itself in the conceit of existing political institutions and forms but safeguarded the gains of democracy against the encroachments by forces that expressly stand to annihilate all forms of popular sovereignty. It was popular and rested its basis not in the sanctity and “integrity” of the institutions of the Spanish Republic, which was not even a decade old, but in the broad masses of the people and their organization in grassroots popular assemblies and neighborhood committees. This is hardly the same as defending the 2024 Democratic Party, which is no less a fascist threat than Trump. It is the Democratic Party, which urges us to “vote against fascism,” that stands for the open terroristic dictatorship of finance capital. The Democratic Party has subdued civil and political society around the consensus of monopoly capital, controlling social and traditional forms of media, marshaling labor and capital to promote its own nihilistic “progressive” ideology, disciplining unions and social groups to the aesthetic and policy-goals of the bourgeoisie, silencing dissenting voices, and fanning the flames of military aggression against Russia and China — all in the name of defending democracy!

If we were to take the third-period policy and resurrect the Popular Front against fascism, it would not look like “Vote Blue No Matter Who,” nor would

it look like voting for the Republican-controlled opposition. “Popular front” does not include allying with the CIA, the DOJ, or FBI. Popular front instead means that a communist party allies itself with all political organizations who can be unified on a general anti-establishment and anti-duopoly platform, from the People’s Party to the libertarians and stands against the oligarchy of Wall Street on concrete and not merely imaginative terms. Only by being the best and most capable fighters of the popular democratic opposition will the communists earn their place as the champions of democratic liberties in the United States. But they cannot secure this position as champions if they are perpetually cowed into supporting the fascistic Democratic Party “against the fascist threat.” This can only result from erroneously articulating the language of the workers’ struggle in the language of the institutionalized bourgeois parties; what must be had is a complete severance from the language, culture, and forms of organizing proper to the Democratic Party and the ruling establishment. This is why MAGA, which provided an alternative counter-hegemonic discourse bearing a partisan relation to the establishment, should be looked at as an opening for the re-articulation of communist politics in the 21st century.

Do you consider it necessary to eschew established forms of mass politics in favor of new forms in order to build a democratic movement? Or are current mass forms of politics adequate for a democratic society?

But what mass politics is there to speak of? If we are speaking of a socialist mass politics, we are speaking of nothing. None of the organizations present here have built vehicles of mass political participation. At best, the “Left” has created highly institutionalized academia-to-activism pipelines that direct the energy of students towards feel-good, cookie-cutter sloganeering and traffic disruptions. Still, besides that, there have been no gains made by communists in this country for decades (if ever at all!).

If we are speaking of revisiting the party form, this is an interesting question that warrants a longer and separate panel. In Infrared, this has been discussed internally for many years before joining with Midwestern Marx in launching the American Communist Party (ACP). The influences of Infrared’s view on the party largely come from the lived experiences of the Communist Party of China and the South African Economic Freedom Fighters, both of which have expanded the scope of party activity beyond what has been traditionally associated with party politics on the Left.

If there is one thing both parties share, it is that they are better integrated into the digital and social-media ecosystems of the 21st century. Twitter and Facebook are the newspapers of yesterday, and communists need to wholly adjust to the attention economy and promote their own socialist influencers, their own socialist social media, and their own socialist products and digital ecosystems that help to build new forms of post-capitalist association and organization. ACP, for its part, is realizing this today with its utilization of blockchain technology and its promotion of socialist entrepreneurs.

The reality is that communism, in the context of the attention economy, is a brand. In the same way that Lenin called socialism “state capitalism made to benefit the whole people,” we should regard socialism, in one sense, as a brand that subsumes all other brands. In bringing the socialization of labor and production to its highest conclusion, socialism is nothing but a monopoly or public trust, secured by the communist party, that develops production towards social and common ends rather than abstract and private ends. The particular form of these social ends is a question for socialist culture — which draws from the unique spirit of a historically constituted people and is something that, once discovered, must be both developed and marketed. The superiority of socialist organization cannot rest its laurels on “moral superiority,” but must be actually innovative and at the vanguard of economic, cultural, and political progress.

This is not calling for the aestheticization of politics by reducing socialism to a commodity or lifestyle. It is instead a recognition that socialism must be adapted to and, when possible, pioneer new digital and social infrastructures that provide the basis for new forms of socialist association and the promotion of social welfare (whether in the form of driving the reduction of working hours or the creation of a “People’s RedRock” to overcome the housing crisis). Socialism must fully utilize the unprecedented blockchain technologies and artificial intelligence to develop a form of socialist entrepreneurship that can build a dual power not just politically, but economically, socially, and culturally. Anyone who finds it distasteful that communist politics should utilize the most technologically sophisticated forms of social and economic organization — who think this is just “using capitalism” — is invited to defer to Lenin, who observed that the productive forces even in his day had become so advanced that communism must only win power and “lop off” the banking cartels: “*Without big banks socialism would be impossible*. The big banks are the ‘state apparatus’ which we need to bring about socialism, and which we *take ready-made* from capitalism; our task here is merely to lop off what *capitalistically mutilates* this excellent apparatus, to make it even *bigger* . . .”¹³

Today, it might be said that the task of communists is not to be a Luddite and reject the technological infrastructure and attention economy developed by finance capital but to take full advantage of it, “lop off what capitalistically mutilates this excellent apparatus” and repurpose it towards socialistic ends. Under the control of a communist party, such a dual power — which I stress must also be economic, social, and cultural, owing to the totalistic nature of the modern state and its absorption of civil society — would directly form the basis of a communist society, just like the soviets of workers, soldiers, and peasant deputies of Russia.

So the question of mass politics is nuanced. Certainly, the mass politics of German Social Democracy is gone forever, while it is clear the Marxist-Leninist, Bolshevik Party form is both alive and thriving in China. This party form has proven itself capable of

adapting to the new era of global integration and is leading the way through the new revolutions of the forces and relations of production. But even this party form, having entered a new era of the development of the productive forces, remains in uncharted territory. Lessons should be drawn from the experience of socialism with Chinese characteristics and integrated into the experience of Marxist-Leninists in the West.

How is democracy related to the possibility of overcoming capital?

Democracy is unrelated to the overcoming of capital except by way of its transformation into socialism, which in turn makes the democratic form redundant. Without the authority of proletarian dictatorship — which secures sovereign ownership of the means of production — democracy is little more than the cover for rapacious oligarchy, which drops all pretenses to democratic rule as it exposes itself as the political form of a class dictatorship. On its own, the liberal democracies are exterminating all vestiges of democracy where it still exists. The constitutions of the bourgeois republics are torn up and the rights of the people are abrogated in the name of national security; the life and death of whole generations is at the whim of a globalized monopoly capitalist class and the world is at the precipice of nuclear war. The rights to speech and association, to privacy and publication — even to economic life, which is increasingly mediated by politicized loans and grants — are increasingly stripped away as the financial oligarchy finds itself resisting the burgeoning multipolar world.

In this sense, the overcoming of the dictatorship of capital is related to the struggle for democracy in the communists’ defense and championing of the rights of the people while simultaneously securing those rights in a substantive, i.e., socialistic, way. For there to be any real freedoms at all, or for there to even be a “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness” as the imagined democratic utopia of the Founders, there must be proletarian dictatorship exercised against the monopoly capitalists. Absent this, there can only be the prostitution of the economy and social relations to the plundering and dominance of the globalized ruling class.

Addendum: Marx on democracy

“Democracy is the truth of monarchy, monarchy is not the truth of democracy.”¹⁴ — Democracy can be understood in terms of itself, whereas monarchy cannot — democracy has no “Big Other” — democracy is the generic constitution, the content and form of a people — democracy “starts with man and makes the state objectified man” — In democracy, the political state disappears.

Democracy: the formal principle (people-rule) is the material content (people-rule). Monarchy: appeal to something external to that over which one rules. Democracy is man for-himself. But this democratic form of representation is still mediated — only by the form of the *demos*, i.e., its civilizational reality. **IP**

¹ Video of the panel is available at <https://youtu.be/BQxb86UTmCo>.

² V. I. Lenin, “Class Society and the State,” in *State and Revolution* (1917), <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1917/staterev/>.

³ See Lenin, “The Economic Basis of the Withering Away of the State,” in *State and Revolution*.

⁴ Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, “Proletarians and Communists,” in *Manifesto of the Communist Party* (1848), <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1848/communist-manifesto/index.htm>, quoted by Lenin in “The Experience of 1848–51,” in *State and Revolution*.

⁵ A phrase used to refer to Chinese economic reform in the late-20th century under guidance from Deng Xiaoping.

⁶ [Ancient Greek] The many; the people. In modern usage it connotes the masses, the less powerful, etc.

⁷ Friedrich Engels, “Barbarism and Civilization,” in *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* (1884), <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1884/origin-family/>.

⁸ Environmental, social, and governance.

⁹ Karl Marx, “The Constitution,” in “Critique of Hegel’s *Philosophy of Right*” (1843), <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1843/critique-hpr/>.

¹⁰ Aleksei Brobinsky was a monarchist chastised by Lenin in “On the National Pride of the Great Russians” (1914). Pavel Milyukov founded the Constitutional Democratic Party (the Kadets). Alexander Kerensky, a member of the Socialist Revolutionary Party (the SRs), led the Russian Provisional Government and the Russian Republic from July to November 1917.

¹¹ See Karl Marx, “For a Ruthless Criticism of Everything Existing” (1844), in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, ed. Robert C. Tucker, second ed. (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1978), 15.

¹² American descendants of slavery.

¹³ V. I. Lenin, “Can the Bolsheviks Retain State Power?” (1917), <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1917/oct/01.htm>.

¹⁴ Marx, “The Constitution.”

“The entanglement of Marxism,” continued from page 1

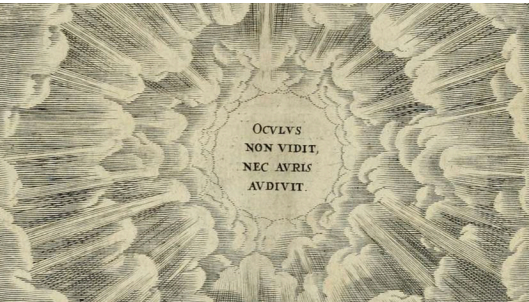
and metaphysics are concerned, Marxists (at least in pre-communism) may not be able to escape some form of alienated thought (be it philosophy, religion, or something else), at least not before the revolution.

In his 1982 book, *Is There a Future for Marxism?*, Alex Callinicos brings up that some leading communist philosophers in the 1960s and 70s, such as Roger Garaudy, found it necessary to blunt the materialist and critical edge of Marxism, not necessarily by pursuing a Christian Marxist dialogue at all, but in the manner that they justified that pursuit. Callinicos shows that they argued that the political need for opposing religious mystification had passed and that it now behooved Marxists to attend to Christian philosophers such as Pere Teilhard de Chardin.¹⁶

In previous decades, as we have noted, the international Communist movement had accepted dogmatically Soviet pseudoscience, denying the truth of Darwinian genetics,¹⁷ following the personal scientific authority of Stalin in a semi-religious manner, just as “Stalinist hacks” (Callinicos’s

phrase), such as François Cohen, had advocated.¹⁸ Such ostensible aberrations from Marxist scientificity can be dismissed as Stalinist revisionism. But what if some form of theoretical revisionism is unavoidable, at least before socialism has been established?

Revisionism is, we are told, the liquidation of Marxist theoretical orthodoxy. I have heard Spencer define Stalinism as the liquidation of Marxism, and therefore designate it as a common form of revisionism. If residues of pre-Marxist thought will be unavoidable before social alienation has been completely transcended, is then significant revisionist deviation in the thinking and practice of socialists not also inevitable, at least before proletarian victory? Amongst the forms such revisionism would be social democratic reformism and Stalinist authoritarianism. (Full disclosure: I myself deviate in the direction of social democratic reformism.)



Otto van Veen, “Quod oculus non vidit, nec auris audivit” (1660) [detail]

Rejecting allegedly overly literal approaches to reading canonical texts, Platypus thinkers such as Spencer advocate that we should discern the spirit of the writing we examine and access genuine Marxism through the *via negativa*,¹⁹ which allows an understanding of what genuine Marxism is to emerge from an understanding of what it is not. Of course, the notion of *via negativa* has an explicitly theological provenance as well.²⁰ (Negative theology by Roman Catholic thinkers has, on multiple occasions, buttressed orthodox [with a small “o”] Church teachings about the nature of God.) Platypus’s interpretative readings according to the “spirit” of the text, even if the reading follows a *via negativa*, feel reminiscent of the hermeneutic strategies of Hans Georg Gadamer. As one can tell from reading Gadamer’s magnum opus *Truth and Method* (1960), philosophical hermeneutics of this kind also have deep roots in explicitly theological writings. To acknowledge this disjuncture between Enlightenment methodologies and Platypus pedagogy concerning texts does not in any way negate the value or insightfulness of Platypus interpretations, but it does raise the question of the extent to which one’s Marxism should be limited by Enlightenment norms.

In the months after the East Coast Conference, I came across the recently released *The Shadow of God*²¹ by Michael Rosen. The thesis of the book is well captured by its subtitle “Kant, Hegel, and the Passage from Heaven to History.” Rosen argues that German Idealists transformed their aspiration for *divine* redemption into an aspiration for *historical* redemption. Marxism itself could be understood as, in part at least, the culmination of this evolution of German Idealism. However, following the containment of the Russian Revolution in 1917, a swathe of earthly political defeat of proletarian insurgency, has made the prospect of historical redemption seem almost as elusive as that of divine redemption. The sharing of such sentiments may lie behind the increased emergence of theological themes in recent critical theory that was previously noted. The salience of Nikki’s intervention becomes ever clearer. **IP**

¹ Nikki Kirigian, Spencer A. Leonard, and Benjamin Studebaker, “Theory in crisis” (October 13, 2024), <https://youtu.be/eampanB995A>, hosted at Harvard University as part of Platypus’s 2024 East Coast Conference.

² Karl Marx, “Contribution to the Critique of Hegel’s *Philosophy of Right* Introduction” (1843), in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, ed. Robert C. Tucker, second ed. (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1978), 54.

³ Karl Marx, “Theses on Feuerbach” (1845), in *Marx-Engels Reader*, 144–45.

⁴ Karl Marx, *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844* (1844), in *Marx-Engels Reader*, 85.

⁵ Karl Marx, *The German Ideology: Part I* (1845–46), in *Marx-Engels Reader*, 154–55.

⁶ Karl Marx, “Critique of the Gotha Program” (1875), in *Marx-Engels Reader*, 540.

⁷ Marx, “Theses on Feuerbach,” 145.

⁸ See Georg Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness: Studies in Marxist Dialectics* (1923).

⁹ Kirigian, Leonard, Studebaker, “Theory in crisis.”

¹⁰ Alex Callinicos, *Is There a Future for Marxism?* (London: The MacMillan Press, 1982), 55.

¹¹ Kirigian, Leonard, Studebaker, “Theory in crisis.”

¹² [Latin] (1) A production, intervention, cause; originator, inventor; (2) a view, opinion, judgment, counsel, advice; decree of the senate, the popular will; (3) an example, pattern, model; (4) a warrant, security for establishing a fact, assertion, credibility; (5) right of possession, etc.

¹³ See Alain Badiou, “The Idea of Communism,” in *The Idea of Communism*, eds. Costas Douzinas and Slavoj Žižek (New York: Verso, 2010), 1–14.

¹⁴ See Slavoj Žižek, *Christian Atheism: How to be a Real Materialist* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2024).

¹⁵ See V. I. Lenin, “The Irish Rebellion of 1916,” in “The Discussion on Self-Determination Summed Up” (1916), <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1916/jul/x01.htm>.

¹⁶ Callinicos, *Is There a Future*, 55.

¹⁷ Ibid., 54.

¹⁸ Ibid., 55.

¹⁹ [Latin] By way of negation, the negative; the negative way, etc.

²⁰ Apophatic theology, also known as negative theology.

²¹ Michael Rosen, *The Shadow of God: Kant, Hegel, and the Passage from Heaven to History* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press, 2022).

Marx-ism?

Or, thinking the crisis in (Marx's) thought

Justin Spiegel

"The philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways; the point is to change it."
— Marx, "Theses on Feuerbach" (1845)¹

ONE COMMON REJOINER to Marx's famous declaration in his last thesis on Feuerbach, raised by Heidegger among others, could be stated roughly as follows: to raise the demand of changing the world is to do so based on a philosophical interpretation of how the world *ought* to be changed. Therefore, Marx's statement, which appears on its face anti-philosophical, in fact presupposes philosophy. This hidden presupposition creates an unsustainable contradiction in the sentence: how might one abandon philosophy, if one nevertheless needs philosophy in order to construct the very *program* for its abandonment? Philosophy, then, would seem inescapable as a register of change: whatever new phenomena one *tries* to introduce in the world would first need to be *formulated*. To act differently, one must first think differently. And one cannot think differently without thinking philosophically.

Taken in one sense, such a rejoinder is plausible: Marx's 11th thesis is by no means anti-philosophical. But neither is it merely philosophy.

Now, how could this be so? To ask that question is to begin mapping a complex relationship between Marxism and philosophy, which found high expression in the crisis of Second International Marxism at the turn of the 20th century. In 1923, Karl Korsch formulated this relationship in terms of the process by which Marx "surpassed the merely philosophical standpoint of his student days," but which nevertheless retained "a philosophical character."² The rest of this essay will explore the substance of that distinction, in terms of the reified social relations of capitalism — the theoretical comprehension of which, for Marx, related dialectically to the practical demand for change. I argue that it is not a question of the kind of thinking that could "ground" world change; rather, it is a question of praxis: of the real coincidence of thinking and being, theory and practice, which Marx located in the revolutionary activity of the proletariat. This question in turn is connected, through the category of crisis, to the question of philosophical change in Marx's thought, as exemplified in later disputes about the existence of a "break" between the early and late Marx.

Centrally, I argue that apparent changes in Marx's thought remain mediated by the history that followed Marx, viz., by the crisis of Marx-ism. The crisis in Marx's own thought was thus repeated posthumously on the world stage, between Marx's students and their students, in the revisionist dispute of the Second International. Further, this crisis embodied the crisis of thought itself in capitalism; and to try to think such a crisis in thought is inevitably to raise the demand for revolution.

Korsch raises "three reasons why we can speak of a surpassal of the philosophical standpoint" in Marx. First, Marx is in total opposition to the premises of (Hegelian) philosophy; second, Marx did not just oppose philosophy but rather "the world as a totality"; finally, "this opposition is not just theoretical but is also practical and active."³ Philosophy was one medium among others through which to voice opposition to the social totality: "[The dialectical materialism of Marx and Engels] is a revolutionary philosophy whose task is to participate in the revolutionary struggles waged in all spheres of society against the whole of the existing order, by fighting in one specific area – philosophy. Eventually, it aims at the concrete abolition of philosophy as part of the abolition of bourgeois social reality as a whole, of which it is an ideal component."⁴ But this demand to abolish philosophy does not entail its one-sided rejection, nor a cessation of consideration for philosophical problems:

Thus the practical political party in Germany is justified in demanding the negation of philosophy. Their error consists not in their demand, but in being content with the demand that they do not and cannot really meet. They believe that they can complete that negation by turning their back on philosophy and murmuring at her with averted head some vexations and banal phrases. Their limited vision does not count philosophy as part of German reality or even fancies that it is beneath the level of German practice and the theories that serve it. You demand that we start from the real seeds of life, but forget until now the real seed of the German people has only flourished inside its skull. In a word: you cannot transcend philosophy without realizing it.⁵

The errors of the "practical political party" in Germany formed one side of an antinomy, the other side of which was formed by Germany's theoretical political party, which committed the opposite error: believing that philosophy can be realized without being transcended or abolished. It is this dialectical relation of Marxism and philosophy, bound up in the demand for its realization as well as abolition, that Korsch argues came to be forgotten by leading theorists of the Second International, in parallel with the forgotten relation of Marxism and the state. The dispute within the Marxist camp, between orthodox and revisionist Marxists, marked the extent to which both these relations had been forgotten, yet demanded remembering in order to keep pace with revolutionary developments in reality. The assimilation of Marxist theory into bourgeois social science, characteristic of the vulgar Marxism of the Second International, reflected an actual schism in the party between theory and practice that revolutionary Marxism tried to bridge. In Korsch's formulation: "The scientific socialism of Marx and Engels, correctly understood, stands in far greater contrast to these pure sciences of bourgeois society (economics, history or sociology) than it does to the philosophy in which the revolutionary movement of the Third Estate

once found its highest theoretical expression."⁶ But what is meant by this close-knit relationship of Marxist theory and practice to the radical bourgeois philosophy of the Third Estate — in short, to Hegel? Georg Lukács writes as follows on the nature of Marx's method:

Let us assume for the sake of argument that recent research had disproved once and for all every one of Marx's individual theses. Even if this were to be proved, every serious "orthodox" Marxist would still be able to accept all such modern findings without reservation and hence dismiss all of Marx's theses *in toto*—without having to renounce his orthodoxy for a single moment. . . . On the contrary, orthodoxy refers exclusively to *method*.⁷

This method, Lukács further argues, is the dialectic that Marx inherits from Hegel. The basic essence of this, let alone any, dialectic, according to Korsch, is that it is characterized by "the coincidence of consciousness and reality."⁸ "Ideology," in other words, constitutes a real material force; it too partakes in reality, like the material base that it formalizes. Bourgeois forms of thought, then, are not simply shams or illusions, but rather are constitutive for the reality they take themselves as reflecting. These forms of thought are related to reality as parts to the whole, i.e., as to a concrete totality: "Only in this context which sees the isolated facts of social life as aspects of the historical process and integrates them in a *totality*, can knowledge of the facts hope to become knowledge of *reality*. This knowledge starts from the simple (and to the capitalist world), pure, immediate, natural determinants described above. It progresses from them to the knowledge of the concrete totality, i.e. to the conceptual reproduction of reality."⁹ One can find a similar formulation by Marx in the *Grundrisse*: "The concrete is concrete because it is a combination of many determinations, i.e. a unity of diverse elements. In our thought it therefore appears as a process of synthesis, as a result, and not as a starting-point, although it is the real starting-point and, therefore, also the starting-point of observation and conception."¹⁰

For bourgeois thought, the simple, abstract determinants of political economy, for example, appear as the result of an analysis that begins with "a chaotic conception of the whole."¹¹ such as population, and reduces it to its basic constituents. Afterwards, the task is to integrate these determinants back into a concrete totality, i.e., into a whole that is no longer chaotic.

It is this dialectical method that Marx inherits from Hegel, according to Lukács. But Marx also distinguishes his approach from Hegel's along the following lines: "Hegel fell into the error, therefore, of considering the real as the result of self-coordinating, self-absorbed, and spontaneously operating thought, while the method of advancing from the abstract to the concrete is but the way of thinking by which the concrete is grasped and is reproduced in our mind as concrete. It is by no means, however, the process which itself generates the concrete."¹²

Herein lies the key to understanding the relationship between Marx's thought and Hegelian dialectic. This latter, i.e., the reproduction in thought of a concrete totality concentrating a diversity of determinations, is preserved, but the system in which it was ensconced, viz., the "self-development of thought," is discarded. Dialectic is taken by Marx, not as the form in which thought reproduces itself, but as a reflection — and by no means a passive one — of historical reality itself, caught up in a total process of change.

The point of revolutionary activity, as set forth in the "Theses on Feuerbach," is therefore to enable the actual process of change constitutive of history to coincide with the consciousness of that process: "The coincidence of the changing of circumstances and of human activity or self-changing can be conceived and rationally understood only as revolutionary practice."¹³ Forms of thought do not precede or ground change, but can be made to reflect extant changes, thereby leading these changes in a revolutionary direction. In reply to the rejoinder introduced above, one can simply say that the world changes already, no matter how we think about it.

So far, I have tracked a crucial continuity in Marx's thought: his dialectical inheritance from Hegel, which he takes as a form of mediation of the revolutionary movement of the proletariat. Clearly, however, Marx's thought is not static. It undergoes change, as does the process of which it takes itself as a form of expression. It is, then, not altogether unjustified to posit a distinction between the early and late, or, as Korsch writes, between the "philosophical" and the "positive-scientific" Marx.¹⁴ But what is the essence of this distinction? Korsch formulates it as follows:

Marx once said that a critic could "*start with any form of philosophical and practical consciousness* and develop from the specific forms of existent reality, its true reality and final end'. But he later became aware that no juridical relations, constitutional structures or forms of social consciousness can be understood in themselves or even in Hegelian or post-Hegelian terms of the general development of the human Spirit. For they are *rooted* in the material conditions of life that form "the material basis and skeleton" of social organization as a whole. A radical critique of bourgeois society can no longer start from "any" form of theoretical or practical consciousness whatever, as Marx thought as late as 1843. It must start from the particular forms of consciousness which have found their scientific expression in the political economy of bourgeois society.¹⁵

Marx's turn to the critique of political economy, marked by the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844*, is characteristic of his changed relation to philosophy following 1843. The rootedness of

forms of thought in "the material conditions of life" necessitates political economy as a starting-point for critique. Nevertheless, for Marx, the critique of political economy "never ceases to be a critique of the *whole* of bourgeois society and so of *all* its forms of consciousness."¹⁶ Marx retains, in his turn to the critique of political economy, the same sense of concrete totality that informed his earlier work. This is exemplified in Marx's sixth thesis: "The human essence is no abstraction inherent in each single individual. In reality it is the ensemble of the social relations."¹⁷

Marx's "Theses on Feuerbach" were an attempt to address what Korsch notes many bourgeois historians of philosophy and philosophers of history have covered up: the connection between the decay and putrescence of the Hegelian system in the mid-19th century, on one hand, and the acceleration of the proletarian movement around that time, on the other.¹⁸ The relation of Hegel and Marx was necessarily elided by those who took the history of philosophy as an ideal history, cordoned off from the real movements of the world. Marx's Theses took the decay of the Hegelian system — its splitting-apart into the contrary determinations of "materialism" and "idealism," being and essence — as a form of expression of a deeper crisis, which demanded practical prosecution through revolutionary activity. Thus, it is no surprise that theorists of Third International Marxism such as Lukács and Korsch appear to be "returning" to the Theses, as an indispensable expression of the revolutionary dialectic in Marx's thought. This apparent return is involved in a broader discussion of "reification" and of the relation of Marxism to bourgeois "criticism" or social sciences. Korsch's and Lukács's essays, after all, were intended largely for bourgeois audiences who were dissatisfied with the vulgarization, the empty, abstract materialism, of Marxism in the Second International. These essays, then, were a rallying cry for bourgeois intellectuals around the Third International in the wake of Marxism's internal crisis; they were not passive reflections of reality, any more than were Marx's Theses themselves.

Lukács begins his essay on reification with a discussion of the commodity relation as the dominant category of capitalist social life:

It is no accident that Marx should have begun with an analysis of commodities when, in the two great works of his mature period, he set out to portray capitalist society in its totality and to lay bare its fundamental nature. For at this stage in the history of mankind there is no problem that does not ultimately lead back to that question and there is no solution that could not be found in the solution to the riddle of the commodity-*structure*. That is to say, the problem of commodities must not be considered in isolation or even regarded as the central problem in economics, but as the central, structural problem of capitalist society in all its aspects. Only in this case can the structure of commodity-relations be made to yield a model of all the objective forms of bourgeois society together with all the subjective forms corresponding to them.¹⁹

Marx turns to the commodity relation as a phenomenon — necessary form of appearance — of capitalism in its totality. Yet to grasp the commodity relation as such, for Marx, is not to alter its essential character:

The fact that in the particular form of production with which we are dealing, viz., the production of commodities, the specific social character of private labour carried on independently, consists in the equality of every kind of that labour, by virtue of its being human labour, which character, therefore, assumes in the product the form of value — this fact appears to the producers, notwithstanding the discovery above referred to, to be just as real and final, as the fact that, after the discovery by science of the component gases of air, the atmosphere itself remained unaltered.²⁰

The commodity relation is not simply a stepladder to a more substantive understanding of capitalism, any more than one ceases to have use for science after discovering its basic laws. As a necessary phenomenon, it cannot be recognized and then discarded in favor of contemplation of a truer, underlying metaphysical reality. Rather, the recognition of the fetishism inherent in the commodity relation points beyond itself, not to another theory, but to revolutionary practice. Lukács discusses the dialectical interrelations of the phenomena of capitalism, as well as the revolutionary demands raised by the recognition of these interrelations, in Marx's *Capital* (1867):

In this respect, superficial readers imprisoned in the modes of thought created by capitalism, experienced the gravest difficulties in comprehending the structure of thought in Capital. For on one hand, Marx's account pushes the capitalist nature of all economic forms to their furthest limits, he creates an intellectual milieu where they can exist in their purest form by positing a society "corresponding to the theory", i.e. capitalist through and through, consisting of none but capitalists and proletarians. But conversely, no sooner does this strategy produce results, no sooner does this world of phenomena seem to be on the point of crystallizing out into theory than it dissolves into a mere illusion . . .²¹

The "point," as it were, of Marx's thought, its "dialectical nexus," has a twofold character, consisting of "the simultaneous recognition and transcendence of immediate appearances."²² To recognize the commodity relation as a phenomenon of capitalism is thereby to recognize the absurdity of capitalism, taken as a totality, and to attempt to transcend it practically. It is thus not a new way of thinking that Marx's thought suggests, but rather the dialectical realization and abolition of all old ways of thinking, together with the objective forms of social life to which they correspond.

Bourgeois thought itself remains unable to achieve such a sublation. The objective and subjective forms of bourgeois society remain necessarily unable to penetrate their material substratum, and this inability is the kernel of what Lukács calls reification:

the more intricate a modern science becomes and the better it understands itself methodologically, the more resolutely it will turn its back on the ontological

problems of its own sphere of influence and eliminate them from the realm where it has achieved some insight. The more highly developed it becomes and the more scientific, the more it will become a formally closed system of partial laws. It will then find that the world lying beyond its confines, and in particular the material base which is its task to understand, *its own concrete underlying reality* lies, methodologically and in principle, *beyond its grasp*.²³

The material substratum of science, consisting in real social relations, remains necessarily hidden behind phantomlike relations among the things that circumscribe science's formal domain. Further, this process mirrors, within the domain of bourgeois thought, the commodity relation, in which "it is a definite social relation between men that assumes, in their eyes, the fantastic form of a relation between things."²⁴

Capitalism molds every form of life in its own image, viz., according to the commodity relation; moreover, Lukács describes reification as the process by which this very molding has penetrated into the movement for socialism itself. The Marxist party, in order to manage its own skyrocketing size, had to become a state within the state of sorts. Its internal functions came to resemble those of the capitalist state, in essence and appearance. A worker with a broken leg would see a proletarian doctor, then return home to read the proletarian newspaper. Organizing for socialism within the context of the capitalist state was not resolving, but was only deepening the crisis of bourgeois society, since now there existed two rival forms of management of bourgeois discontent: capitalism and socialism. This radical choice found expression within the Marxist party itself, in the form of a dispute between revisionist and orthodox Marxists. The former wanted to assimilate Marxism back into a passive, contemplative bourgeois social science, a move that Lukács takes as the starting point for his analysis of reification. Within the latter, orthodox camp was another division, between the Center and Left. The Center rejected the revisionist criticism of Marxism as un-Marxist and therefore unworthy of serious consideration, whereas the revolutionary Left took it as an expression of the objective ripeness of the world for socialism. The Center therefore postponed the task of revolution into the nebulous future, whereas the Left took revisionism as a sign of a threat that the party might be reabsorbed by, and hence inherit, the capitalist state; it thus approached the task of revolution with new urgency and under the guise of a return to the authentic Marxism of Marx and Engels.

In the Marxism of the Second International, therefore, the crisis in Marx's thought was posed as a crisis of reality itself. Thought could no longer think through the reality that had produced it, and this incapacity of thinking found expression in the inexorable choice, socialism or barbarism? The revolutionary Marxists of the Second and Third Internationals acted under full knowledge of the disastrous consequences of their undertaking, should they fail. We ourselves live in the continuation and deepening of those consequences. The question, then, is this: might the Left renew its courage to fail again? **[P**

¹ Karl Marx, "Theses on Feuerbach" (1845), in *Karl Marx: Selected Writings*, ed. David McClellan, second ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 173.

² Karl Korsch, *Marxism and Philosophy*, trans. Fred Halliday (Monthly Review Press, 2009), 66.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid., 67–68.

⁵ Karl Marx, "Towards a Critique of Hegel's *Philosophy of Right*: Introduction" (1843), in *Karl Marx: Selected Writings*, 76.

⁶ Korsch, *Marxism and Philosophy*, 61–62.

⁷ Georg Lukács, "What is Orthodox Marxism?" (1919), in *History and Class Consciousness: Studies in Marxist Dialectics*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1971), 1.

⁸ Korsch, *Marxism and Philosophy*, 77–78.

⁹ Lukács, "Orthodox Marxism," 8.

¹⁰ Karl Marx, *Grundrisse* (1857–58), in *Karl Marx: Selected Writings*, 386.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Marx, "Theses on Feuerbach," 172.

¹⁴ Korsch, *Marxism and Philosophy*, 77.

¹⁵ Ibid., 74–75.

¹⁶ Ibid., 75.

¹⁷ Marx, "Theses on Feuerbach," 172.

¹⁸ Korsch, *Marxism and Philosophy*, 37–38.

¹⁹ Georg Lukács, "Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat" (1923), in *History and Class Consciousness*, 83.

²⁰ Karl Marx, "From *Capital*, Volume One: On the Fetishism of Commodities," in *Karl Marx: Selected Writings*, 475.

²¹ Lukács, "Orthodox Marxism," 8.

²² Ibid.

²³ Lukács, "Reification," 104.

²⁴ Marx, "On the Fetishism of Commodities," 473.